

Story 2020 (1998 Tape 5)

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Three Pieces of Advice for the Widow's Son

Once a very long time ago there were a widow and her son who lived in a village. Time passed, and the one field which they owned became less and less productive until finally it could not produce any crop. When things reached that point, they had no income at all.

One day the boy went to his mother and said, "Mother, let me go to Istanbul, as everyone else seems to be doing. Let me go there to work and earn some money. Then, after that, I shall return to this village."

At first his mother was unable to accept this idea, but after awhile she said, "Very well, my son. Go, work hard, earn a lot of money, and then come back--just as you want to do. You certainly cannot earn any money here." And with those words she sent her son to Istanbul.

The boy joined a group of his friends who were also going to that city. They walked all the way to Istanbul, for they had no money with which to pay for

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transportation. The son of the widow looked for a job for quite some time. Three weeks passed, four weeks passed, and still he could not find a job. One day he came to a house where only an old man lived. He said to that old man, "I should like to work for you."

The old man answered, "All right. You may work for me, but I shall be able to pay you only a very small amount of money per year.

"How much can you pay me?" asked the boy, thinking that it would probably be about ten kuruş.¹

"You will eat and live here, but I shall be able to pay you only one kuruş."

The boy could not believe his ears, and so he asked, "Would you really pay me only one kuruş?"

"Yes, I should be able to pay you one kuruş, but at the end of the year I shall also give you a piece of

¹One kuruş for a year's work would clearly represent some degree of underpayment, but one should not gauge the extent of that underpayment in terms of late 20th-century monetary values. The now extinct kuruş was worth 1/100 of a Turkish lira. In the late 20th century, it took well over 200,000 liras to equal one U.S. dollar. At that point the kuruş became worthless. In pre-Republican times, however, the kuruş was not the smallest monetary unit. There were 40 paras to the kuruş then. Although no longer functional, the para and the kuruş still linger in the Turkish language. When someone asks the price of something

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advice which will be useful to you for the rest of your life."

The boy asked, "How can I fill my stomach afterwards with that advice? What will I be able to do with Excuse me, but I have decided that I do not wish to work for you." He then returned to his friends. But he became so curious about the advice that the old man offered that he was unable to sleep for two or three nights. He finally said to himself, "Well, for goodness' sake, I shall probably not find another job anyway, and so I might as well go and work for that old man. In that way I can get the advice which the old man says will be beneficial to me for the rest of my life. What else can I do?" He therefore returned to the old man's house.

He worked there for a full year. He chopped wood and stoked the fireplace with that wood. He cleaned the house and dusted books, for the old man was a scholar who had a large library. The boy worked for the year agreed upon, and at the end of that time the old man paid him one

he wishes to purchase, he is likely to say, "Kaç para?" ("How many para?") or "Kaç kuruş?" ("How many kuruş?").

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kuruş. He also gave him the piece of advice he had promised. "Listen carefull now to this piece of advice: Never take a route that you do not know very well.

"Is that all?" the boy asked.

"Yes, that is all."

Annoyed, the boy said, "I knew that already!"

"That is all right. Now you have been reminded of it again."

The boy grew angry then and asked, "Did I work for a whole year for this? I knew that myself without your having to tell it to me!"

"If you wish to work for me for another year, may do so. For that I shall pay you one kuruş and I shall give you another piece of advice.

"No, I shall not work for you any longer. I cannot work another whole year for one kuruş, and I doubt that I shall ever benefit from any of your advice." Saying this, the boy left and returned to the place where friends from his own village were staying. He looked for another job for several days, but again he was lucky enough to find work. As before, he became curious about the old man's advice. "What would his second piece

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of advice be?" he wondered. "What will happen if I work a second year for him? Regardless of that, I might as go and work for him, for I can find no other job." Returning to the old man, he said, "All right! I shall work for for another year."

The boy did much the same kind of work he had done during the first year. He chopped wood, and with it he stoked the fireplace. He cleaned the house and dusted the books. He did everything that needed to be done, even cooking sometimes for the lonely old man.

At the end of that second year, the old man put another kuruş into the hand of the boy and gave him a second piece of advice. He said, "Don't ever be unfaithful about anything entrusted to you for safekeeping."

"Is that all you have to advise me? I knew this rule too. Did I work a whole year for such words?"

"It is often beneficial to be reminded of truths that one already knows."

Angry at hearing this, the boy said, "I shall never work for you again!"

"I have yet a third valuable piece of advice for you. I shall give it to you if you will work for me yet

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another year."

"No, of course not!" answered the boy. "I have already wasted two whole years for nothing. I promised my mother that I would earn some money and return to my village. In the past two years I have earned nothing but two kuruş and two useless statements."

"As you wish," replied the old man. "You may do whatever you want to do."

The boy left, but then the same thing happened that had happened twice before. He thought, "O Allah, I have worked two years for him already. It will not be much worse if I work for him one year more. Perhaps his third piece of advice will be worth more than the first two were." Returning to the old man, he said, "I have decided to work for you for one last year."

"Good!"

The boy worked just as hard as he had before, performing the same chores he had done during the first two years. At the year's end the boy went to his employer to receive his one kuruş and his final piece of advice. This time the old man said, "Never permit your wife to go anywhere unaccompanied by you."

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Angry at the way he had been treated, the boy said "I worked here for only three kuruş. Because there seems to be no money for me in this city of Istanbul, I shall return to my village. I shall be glad to go back there, for, in truth, I have missed my mother."

"All right, but come back here to see me just before you leave. Let us then forgive each other for any outstanding obligations.² Also, I want to give you a small gift."

The boy agreed to this and departed in order to make preparations for the trip back to his village. Two or three days later, he returned to his employer and kissed his hand. After they had forgiven each other of all indebtedness, the boy said, "I shall leave now."

"That is as it should be," answered the old man.

"Here are two loaves of Istanbul bread for your mother."

²The reference here is to helâl/haram, a Muslim religious concept. That which is helâl is that which is permissible according to canonical law. That which is haram is forbidden. There is no obligation or restriction or penalty for doing or taking whatever is helâl, but there will be a penalty on Judgment Day for doing or taking what is forbidden. To accept something from a donor is helâl; to take it or steal it is haram. To do anything morally or religiously improper is haram. Dying or endangered people or those parting forever often declare helâl anything they have given to or done for another person, so that No. 2 will not go to Judgment Day indebted to another (which is haram unless declared helâl by the benefactor).

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Surprised by this, the boy thought, "O Allah, Allah! Couldn't he find anything but bread to give me? He is a stingy man anyway. What else can be expected from someone like him? I worked three years for him, and all that he gives me as a parting gift are two loaves of bread! He should really have given me something of great value!" This was what he thought, but all that he said was, "Farewell!"

The boy rejoined several of his village friends who were also preparing to go home. All of them had worked hard and had been fortunate enough to earn quite large sums of money. But the widow's son had to report that he had earned only three kuruş in three years, he then proceeded to tell them all that he had experienced. They all laughed and made fun of him, but they invited him to join them on their trip back to their village.

Because his friends were now quite rich, they rented a caravan to take them home. The caravan included horses for the young men to ride and donkeys to carry all of the gifts they had bought for their many relatives. Feeling sorry for the widow's son, they provided a horse for his use on the journey. There was nothing in the saddlebag of his horse except the two loaves of Istanbul bread for

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his mother.

After the caravan had gone some distance, it approached a large stream. The riders slowed down the pace of their horses as they tried to decide where they should attempt to cross that stream. One of the friends of the widow's son chose his own place to make the crossing. As that friend was preparing to enter the stream, the widow's son remembered the first piece of advice given to him by his hoca:³ "Never take a route that you do not know very well." He reined in his own horse to a halt. But his friend, who had already plunged into the stream, was caught in a whirlpool and drowned. What a disaster! The widow's son thought, "Oh, now I realize how important was my hoca's first piece of advice! I gave a whole year of my life for that piece of advice, but I now gladly give you that year without your being obligated to me in any way. It is yours, hoca."

The group of travelers then asked a local peasant to tell them where the stream could be safely crossed,

³ A hoca is a preacher and the religious leader of a Muslim community. In pre-Republican times the hoca was also the community teacher. Separation of "church" and state in the Republic required that teachers be people of secular rather than religious training. But even to this day Turks sometimes refer fondly to a teacher or professor as "my hoca."

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and they then passed over it at the place he indicated. By then the travelers were all becoming hungry. The son of the widow thought, "I wonder if I should eat a piece of the bread that my employer sent to my mother? No, let me neither eat it nor divide it, for if I do either, I shall return home completely empty-handed."

A short while later the travelers were confronted by a group of bandits who forced them to stop and dismount. The thieves then took from the wealthy travelers all of their gold, all of their valuables, and all of the gifts they were taking home. When the bandits turned to the son of the widow, their leader asked him, "What did you buy? Where is all your money?"

"Oh, he doesn't have any money or anything else," said his friends.

The boy himself explained this: "I worked hard but I earned only three kuruş."

Taking the three kuruş, the bandit leader asked, "How could you be so stupid?" He then ordered his men to beat severely the son of the widow. The boy did not mind this very much, for he realized that all of his friends were now just as poor as he was. They did not have among them even five paras.

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As he thought about this most recent event, the son of the widow suddenly concluded, "Oh, my hoca, your second piece of advice to me was, 'Don't ever be unfaithful about anything entrusted to you for safekeeping.' I did not eat or give away the bread that I was entrusted with to take to my mother, and I was rewarded for that by being able to save the bread that had been sent to her. Oh, my hoca, I thank you, and I give up all right for my second year of work for you."

All of the young travelers continued onward to their homes. When the widow's son reached his home, he and his mother hugged each other. "How are you?" she asked him. "And how did you get along during your three years in Istanbul?"

"I am well," he said, "but I am very hungry. Do you have anything to eat?"

His mother answered, "No, there is nothing here to eat." But then she asked, "Didn't you bring home a lot of money?"

"No, I did not. I brought home only two objects. My employer sent to you two loaves of Istanbul bread."

"All right," she said. "Bring them out and we shall

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eat them." When they cut into the two loaves, they discovered with great surprise that they were filled with gold coins. The boy was so pleased that he inwardly thanked again his former employer for his second piece of advice. If he had disregarded that advice and had cut into the loaves before the bandit attack, he would have lost all the gold that they contained. The old man's first piece of advice had saved the boy's life, and his second piece of advice had saved what turned out to be the boy's fortune.

With his new wealth the son of the widow set up a large farm, buying more fields and all kinds of livestock. His farm flourished, and after awhile he became the richest man in all the villages of that area. After a few more years had passed, the widow's son realized that the time had come when he should get married. "My employer's first two pieces of advice saved my life and my fortune. I am willing to follow also his third piece of advice: 'Never permit your wife to go anywhere unaccompanied by you.'"

Wherever he went to seek a bride, he told the girl's family that he intended to follow this piece of advice. But this had an unfortunate effect. Every family to which

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he told it became annoyed and rejected his proposal of marriage. They asked him, "Do you expect us to allow our daughter to become a captive or a slave?"

The son and his mother finally found a very poor girl in a remote village whose family said they could accept his terms, but the matter was not really settled yet. The two were married and lived together for some time. One day relatives of the wife visited the home of the widow's son. They pleaded with him for permission to take the young wife back to her village for a few days. They said, "She has been away from her home village for a long while, and we should like to take her back briefly to attend the wedding celebration of one of her friends. Please let her go." His wife also begged him to do so.

Upset and sad, the young husband said reluctantly "All right. You may go." And so she set out with their only child, a son, in the company of her relatives.

No sooner had they gone, however, than the husband regretted what he had done. He said to himself, "Alas! Why didn't I follow my employer's third piece of advice? His first two pieces of advice saved my life and my tune. Why did I fail to honor his third warning?" He

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set out immediately for his wife's village.

When he arrived there, he saw that everyone seemed to be involved in the wedding celebration. Looking through the crowd, he saw his wife and little son huddled in a corner watching men and women dancing together in the street filled with people. Pointing to his wife, the husband asked an old lady, "Auntie, who is that woman over there?"

"Don't you ask me too much about her, my son. We gave her away as a bride to a very cruel man. He is so cruel that this the first time during their marriage that he has permitted her to return to her own village."

"Is that really so? If you could arrange to have me let into her room tonight, I shall give you ten gold coins."

Upon hearing the words ten gold coins, the old woman said, "I can surely do so. There is nothing easier to do than this, if that is what you wish." When it began to get dark, she spoke to him again. She said, "Listen, that woman is the daughter of a neighbor of mine. She will be sleeping in such and such a room." The husband then gave old woman the ten gold coins he had promised

When it became fully dark, the husband covered

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face with a cloth so that he would not be identified. When he entered his wife's bedroom, he was not recognized by her, and she immediately began to shout. No one else in the house heard her, and so she begged the intruder not to touch her. She sat in a corner and would not allow the man to come near her. The husband waited silently throughout the night. When his wife fell asleep, toward dawn, he quietly took the child and ran away swiftly with him.

When the woman woke up in the morning and found that her child was missing, she started to scream: "Alas, where is my child? What has happened to my child?" This time her family heard her cries, and soon they and all of their neighbors began searching the village for the boy. Her father, her mother, and her other relatives were shocked by what had happened. They now regretted what had occurred, and they felt guilty for having begged her husband to allow them to take her to their village.

When the child could be found nowhere in the village, people began to wonder what could be done to protect the innocent mother of the infant from blame. After awhile the old woman who had received the gold coins suggested a plan.

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She said to the family, "This is really a very old house in which you have been living. Let us secretly set house on fire and then tell the child's father that it had died in the flames." This idea was accepted, and so the old woman and the members of the young wife's family burned the house to the ground.

Then they went in great sorrow to the home of the child's father, whom they sometimes now called ağa⁴ because of his great wealth and social position. He pretended to be surprised to see them, and he asked his weeping wife, "What has happened?"

"Oh, do not ask such a question!" his wife wailed "There was a fire in my family's home last night, and our son died in the flames!"

⁴An ağa (English agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. Ağas are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger sibling. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

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Much to the amazement of the mourners, the ağa burst out laughing. All of the grieving family members were stunned by his behavior. They said, "O Allah, Allah! What is the matter with him? Why is he laughing on such a terrible occasion?"

The ağa opened the door of an adjoining room, and immediately the little boy ran out of that room and into his mother's arms. Astounded by this turn of events, everyone asked, "Where did he come from?"

The ağa then asked, "Can you now see how wise were the words of my hoca: 'Never permit your wife to go anywhere unaccompanied by you'?" Turning then to his wife, he said, "If you had let me touch you that night that we spent in the same room at your family home, I should have killed you. It is because of your virtue that I forgive you now."

After the ağa had sent away in disgrace all of his wife's relatives, he thought again about his hoca, his former employer. "You saved my life and my fortune with your first two pieces of advice. With the advice you gave me for my third year's work, you saved my family too. I make helâl also that third year of work that I did for you."

After that the son of the widow continued to live

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happily as the village ağa. For the remainder of his life he continued to be grateful for the three valuable pieces of advice he had been given.